MONITORING OUR WATER: Pontiac Lake boat race is threatened

Fast-falling levels could cancel event

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This month's heat and rainfall could make or break the Pontiac Lakehydroplane races called Quake on the Lake.

If temperatures in the 90s and a lack of rain keep evaporating water,the 756-acre artificial lake could become too shallow for the third annual hydroplane races, said Russ Schulte, an organizer of the July 27-28 event.

Also known as the Governor's Cup Race, the event is expected to draw 75 race drivers who will compete for speed records in front of approximately 7,000 people. Traveling at 130-150 m.p.h., hydroplanes can make a big lake seem small. Last year, five world speed records were broken on Pontiac Lake.

But last year the water was barely deep enough to hold the race, and the possibility that the lake might hold too little water for high-speed racing this year was raised this week by John Benedict, a lake-level technician with the Oakland County Drain Commission who monitors the lake's level every day. He also adjusts the dam that controls water flow downstream in the Huron River.

"I'm watching Pontiac Lake suffer under the sun," Benedict said. "It's frightening."

The ongoing hot weather is evaporating water from the lake at between a quarter- and a half-inch a day, and water is vanishing from the lake faster than the groundwater table and flow from the Huron River can replace it, Benedict said.

Rick Sorrell, chief of hydrologic studies for the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality, said, "Lakes are probably going to be low now because of the heat and low rainfall in the last couple months."

A quarter-inch of water loss a day would lower the lake by 5 inches in 20 days. At a loss of a half-inch a day, those 5 inches of water would be gone in as little as 10 days, Benedict figured.

At that rate, Benedict said, "We're not ever going to make it to the race days."

And rain isn't likely to come soon. "Unfortunately, I just don't see any widespread rainfall event through the next week," said National Weather Service meteorologist Steve Considine.

If there is not enough water, the races won't be run, said Schulte, immediate past president of the Waterford Lions Club, which organizes the races. "Safety comes first."

Hydroplanes must race in water deep enough for a driver to be extracted from a boat that has flipped upside down with its cockpit canopy underwater, Schulte said.

"There's stumps in that lake, and of course if a boat caught a wave and dove, it could get stuck in the bottom if it was too shallow," Schulte said.

"Anyway, you wouldn't want to do it on a mud puddle."

To Wally Fusilier, who studies Michigan lakes for lakeside homeowners associations, the problem is not the weather but the natural depth of the lake.

Although one part of Pontiac Lake is 34 feet deep, the average depth is 5.1 feet because the lake is really a stretch of the Huron River that has been dammed up, Fusilier said.

While hydroplane pilots may find the lake low, it's plenty deep enough for normal boating, said Stan Ludlow, a board member with the Pontiac Lake Property Owners Association.

Overall, inland lakes are at higher levels this year than in recent years and "all the lakes are pretty much getting back to their normal levels," Sorrell said.

"Little inland lakes are much more sensitive to short-term changes in local weather" than the Great Lakes, said Mike Wiley, professor of aquatic ecology at the University of Michigan.

Although Lakes Michigan and Huron were very low the last two years, they've rebounded and are 9-10 inches higher than last year, said John Love, a physical scientist with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

"While they're still below average, they're much better than they were in 2001," Love said.